



## MEGAN'S ACCOUNT

The unlikely story of a cash-strapped single mom turned sex trafficking survivor, and the sociology professor who changed her life.

BY JOHN H. TUCKER

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN

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here are three types of pimps. Megan Lundstrom will tell you this. First, there's the boyfriend pimp. He's the one who romances you with promises of a family, who coaxes you into turning tricks to finance a blissful future. You think you're in love with him until the physical abuse becomes too much to bear. Then there's the CEO pimp. He's flirty at first, but instead of wooing you, he works you to exhaustion with promises of modeling fame. He charges a "choosing fee" to enter his enter-

prise and a "leaving fee" to exit. He, too, gives you bruises, but this is business, and you've got a quota. Finally, there's the gorilla pimp. You might meet him at a bar and wake up later having been drugged, kidnapped, and raped.

Lundstrom will also tell you she's experienced two of the three pimps. But that's just the beginning of her story. The 36-year-old Coloradan gained most of her knowledge about the so-called life after her escape, having traveled an unlikely path from sex work to sociology.

The study of active commercial sex exploitation, whether via pimp control or other modes of sex trafficking, is relatively new, with scholars mostly relying on secondary sources like court documents and police reports. But such resources are of lesser importance to Lundstrom, who lays claim to an underground gold mine of primary source material: a private Instagram account followed exclusively by active prostitutes and trafficking survivors. Created a decade ago as her only means of socialization, the account at one point was co-opted by her pimp as a recruiting tool. Since Lundstrom's escape, however, her following has surged from around 50 to 2,200 women, providing a database now used to unlock the mysteries of a brutal but hidden crime and expand the parameters of social science. This past year has been the most revelatory yet. COVID-19 has shaken up all kinds of professions—including, it seems, the world's oldest—pulling many young women into a dangerous line of work in order to make ends meet.

**LUNDSTROM WAS BORN** in Greeley, Colorado, a university town of about 100,000 that was founded in 1870 as an experimental utopian community but is now mostly known for its smelly meatpacking plants. Her childhood was sheltered, with fresh-baked cookies awaiting her return from soccer practice or orchestra rehearsal. She made the honor roll and earned a college scholarship.

Plans changed when, at 18, she became pregnant by her boyfriend, a Kmart coworker. The couple married, and Lundstrom envisioned a quiet domestic life, not uncommon for Greeley girls. But after a second child, she says, their marriage broke apart. At 23, she and her kids moved to Denver to start a new life. She found work as a teacher's assistant, but struggled to pay her bills. That's when a friend told her about a website called SeekingArrangement. "She was like, 'Think about it—you don't want a committed long-term relationship; you just go on dates with rich men to nice restaurants,'" Lundstrom recalls. "It seemed super casual."

The concept, known as "sugaring" has been around since the early 1900s, when San Francisco socialite Alma de Bretteville coined the term "sugar daddy" in reference to her much older sugar-magnate husband, Adolph Spreckels. It's only grown in the age of online dating. Sites like SeekingArrangement (which Rep. Matt Gaetz allegedly used) will often pair wealthy men with cash-strapped "sugar babies." Money or gifts are exchanged for going on "dates." While Lundstrom didn't realize it initially, sex is often a tacit part of sugar dating. If that sounds like prostitution...well, based on her experiences, Lundstrom would argue that it is.

As opposed to escorting services, with inherent expectations, some sugaring sites market themselves as progressive, win-win dating brokerages. But it's all a sham, says Benjamin Gauin, a prosecutor for King County in Seattle,

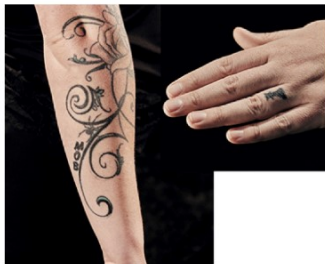
## From the SEEDY STREETS to the HALLS OF ACADEMIA

A former sex trafficking victim details her journey.



### THE SHOES

LUNDSTROM KEEPS THE SHOES SHE WAS ARRESTED IN ON A SHELF IN HER OFFICE AS A REMINDER OF THE PAIN SHE'S OVERCOME. "ANY TIME I FEEL OVERWHELMED, I LOOK AT THEM AND THINK, I HAVE TO WRITE A GRANT REPORT? THAT AIN'T SHIT."



### THE TATTOOS

"MOB" STANDS FOR "MONEY OVER BITCHES," AND HER CHESS PIECE RING-FINGER TATTOO SIGNIFIES BEING MARRIED TO THE GAME.



### THE DIPLOMA

LUNDSTROM'S MASTER'S DEGREE SITS IN HER OFFICE AT THE SEX TRAFFICKING RESEARCH CENTER SHE FOUNDED.

who exclusively works on commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking cases. "Sugar websites are the new frontier of exploitation because they blur the criminality of a transaction," he says. The victims in his professional orbit are minors; buyers are affluent and privileged.

SeekingArrangement founder and CEO Brandon Wade denies his site is a prostitution platform, suggesting that perhaps 5 percent of members "use it wrongly." He works with the FBI, he says, and removes rogue users on a daily basis. "You want to hire a prostitute, there's a much faster way to do that than play this dancing game," he says. A "beginner's guide" blog post on the site states "Sugar dating is just like any other dating. Sex should be aspired to, but never required." And to be sure, not every sugar baby reports a negative experience. Some claim financial empowerment, while others question the difference between having sex with a stranger from a nightclub and a stranger met online.

After creating her SeekingArrangement profile, Lundstrom watched her inbox flood with messages, many about sex. The first guy showed up with a giant long-haired dog in his luxury car. Back at his open-concept loft, he instructed Lundstrom to position herself on a particular side of the bed, then kept ducking out of sight, as if to adjust a hidden camera. The dog followed him everywhere. Lundstrom couldn't go through with sex that night, though she did with the next guy, who slapped her and didn't pay afterward. The third guy smoked lots of weed, listened to jam bands, and told her he'd post a favorable review on a local sex forum. That's when Lundstrom realized she wasn't a sugar baby. She was a prostitute.

Around this time, Lundstrom met a man while filling her tank at a gas station. He rolled up in a nice car and showered her with compliments. He was a drug dealer, she later learned, but "because I grew up so sheltered in a rural area, he seemed exciting," she recalls. The next month was a "love bombing," Lundstrom says. The man moved in with promises of lifelong unity; she tattooed his name on her pelvic region as a mark of loyalty.

This was the boyfriend pimp. We'll call him Luther. (Lundstrom asked that the names of her pimps be withheld due to a fear of retaliation.) When Lundstrom told Luther she'd been on SeekingArrangement, his eyes widened. "Have you thought about working at a strip club?" he asked. "What about Backpage?" (Before being seized by the federal government in 2018 for facilitating prostitution, Backpage was a classified advertising website frequently used by sex traffickers.) Lundstrom was in dire financial straits; plus, her car had just broken down. Luther was investing in various businesses, he told her—growing marijuana and breeding exotic reptiles—and extra cash could help their future. Lundstrom agreed to sugar again, with proceeds going to Luther.



#### THE AVERY CENTER

ANGIE HENDERSON (LEFT) AND LUNDSTROM STAND OUTSIDE THE FORMER SITE OF THE AVERY CENTER, A SEX TRAFFICKING RESEARCH AND SUPPORT SERVICES NONPROFIT BORN OUT OF THEIR WORK.

The arrangement continued for two years, until Lundstrom could no longer stand Luther's violence. She moved with her kids in the dead of night and filed a complaint with the police. After this, and subsequent attempts to flee, Luther would track her down, each time pledging his love and paying for shopping sprees and fancy meals, creating an emotional addiction known as a trauma bond. The last time Lundstrom kicked Luther out, he put seven bullets in the babysitter's car, she says. Soon after, some of his friends broke into her apartment. While she and her kids stood by helplessly, the men made off with \$6,000 and all of Lundstrom's identification documents. She had no one to turn to. No proof she even existed.

**STROLLING THE LAS VEGAS STRIP** During a trip funded by a regular, Lundstrom was approached by a man in a Hummer. Later, at his mansion, he commented on Lundstrom's tattoos: her arm emblazoned with "MOB," for "money over bitches," a common pimp phrase; and her ring-finger queen chess piece, signaling she was "married to the game." This was the CEO pimp.

Lundstrom mentioned her attempts to escape Luther. The new man—we'll call him Otto—said he ran girls who scored big. The next month, Otto visited Lundstrom in Denver with a pitch. For a \$5,000 choosing fee, she could leave Luther without fear. Absent that, Luther had the right to stalk her, Otto explained, as game rules dictated that prostitutes must be under pimp control at any given time. Lundstrom gave Otto a down payment and wired the remaining money that month. By the time she and her kids were headed to Vegas in a moving truck, Otto had settled the score with Luther: "She's my property now." In just one phone call, he'd protected Lundstrom from Luther in a way the police couldn't, even after ten 911 calls and a restraining order.

The following night, Lundstrom was collected by Otto's "bottom girl"—a reference to a prostitute whose long-term loyalty earns her delegation power. As they worked a casino carpet, the bottom offered instructions. The first guy they propositioned turned out to be an undercover cop.

"Welcome to Vegas," Otto said after bailing Lundstrom out. "No big deal—you're getting felony money on misdemeanor charges." Even so, she'd need to work off court fees. Over the next several months,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 132

# Shopping Guide

## COVERS

**ADULT AWECH**  
Dress by Prada, prada.com. Ring by Harry Winston, harrywinston.com.

## KENDALL JENNER

Dress by Celine by Hedi Slimane, celine.com. Rings by Bulgari, bulgari.com. Sweater, shirt, trousers, belt by Etro, etro.com.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**PAGE 16:** Jacket, earrings by Chanel, select Chanel boutiques nationwide.  
**PAGE 18:** Jacket, bustier top by Dior, select Dior boutiques nationwide. Briefs by NakedCashmere, nakedcashmere.com. Fishnets by Wolford, wolford.com. Rings by H&H—Holly Silius & Hannah Warner, @hollysilius.

## EDITOR'S LETTER

**PAGE 54:** Dress by Prada, prada.com. Ring by Harry Winston, harrywinston.com. Dress by Celine by Hedi Slimane, celine.com. Rings by Bulgari, bulgari.com.

## NINA'S EDIT

**PAGE 55:** Watch by Rolex, \$10,800, rolex.com.

## NEW ARRIVALS

**PAGE 57:** Watch by Rolex, \$46,900, rolex.com.

## SHOP

**PAGE 69:** Watch by Omega, \$21,400, omegawatches.com. Tote bag by Dior, \$2,950, Dior boutiques nationwide.  
**PAGE 70:** Watch by Breitling, \$5,550, breiting.com.

## CULTURE

**PAGE 83:** Blazer by M&M Maison Mangela, maisonmangela.com. Hoop earrings, ring by Melissa Kaye, melissakayejewelry.com.

## CITY OF ANGELS

**PAGE 91:** Shirt, bodysuit by N°21 by Alessandro Dell'Aquila, numeroseventeen.com. Boots by Khaite, khaite.com.  
**PAGE 93:** Jacket, platforms by Prada, prada.com. Top by Aisling Camps, aislingcamps.com. Fishnets by Wolford, wolford.com. Briefs by NakedCashmere, nakedcashmere.com.  
**PAGE 94:** Hoodie by Celine by Hedi Slimane, celine.com.  
**PAGE 95:** Jacket, hoodie, dress, boots by Celine by Hedi Slimane, celine.com.  
**PAGE 96–97:** Jacket, bustier top by Dior, select Dior boutiques nationwide. Briefs by NakedCashmere, nakedcashmere.com. Fishnets by Wolford, wolford.com. Rings by H&H—Holly Silius & Hannah Warner, @hollysilius.  
**PAGE 98:** Jacket by R13, r13.com. Bustier top by Moschino Couture, saksfifthavenue.com. Briefs by Sir, sirthebel.com.  
**PAGE 99:** Dress, top, boots by Balenciaga, balenciaga (NYC).

**PAGE 100:** Cardigan, bralette by Fendi, fendi.com. Necklace by Bulgari, bulgari.com.  
**PAGE 101:** Bomper, boots by Miu Miu, miu-miu.com.  
**PAGE 102:** Coat by Gucci, gucci.com.  
**PAGE 103:** Sweater, shirt, trousers, belt by Etro, etro.com.  
**PAGE 104:** Bustier top, LaQuan Smith, saksfifthavenue.com.  
**PAGE 105:** Coat, sweater, boots by Louis Vuitton, louisvuitton.com. Bracelets by Bulgari, bulgari.com.

## SHOE'S ELECTRIC

**PAGES 106–107:** Coat by Michael Kors Collection, mikors.com. Boots by Prada, prada.com.  
**PAGE 108:** Coat by Khaite, khaite.com. Earrings by Cartier, by appointment, 800-CARTIER, PAGES 109–110. Dress by Tom Ford, tomford.com. Earrings, ring by Cartier, by appointment, select Cartier boutiques nationwide. Tights by Emilio Cavallini, emiliocavallini.com.  
**PAGE 113:** Coat, top by Chanel, select Chanel boutiques nationwide. Tights by Falke, amazon.com.  
**PAGE 114:** Top by Raf Simons, luisaviaroma.com.  
**PAGE 115:** Dress, gloves, boots by Prada, prada.com.  
**PAGE 116–117:** Dress by Alexander McQueen, alexandermcqueen.com. Gloves by Wing & Welf, wingandwelf.com. Bracelet by Bulgari, \$122,000, bulgari.com.  
**PAGE 118:** Top by Raf Simons, luisaviaroma.com. Watch by Harry Winston, harrywinston.com.  
**PAGE 119:** Bra, pants by Aerie, aerie.com. Handbag, boots by Prada, prada.com.  
**PAGE 120:** Coat by Givenchy, similar styles at givenchy.com. Garter belt by Agent Provocateur, agentprovocateur.com. Bracelet by Van Cleef & Arpels, \$490,000, vancliefarpe.com.  
**PAGE 121:** Dress by Versace, versace.com.

## PEAK PERFORMANCE

**PAGE 123:** Jacket, bodysuit, earrings, necklace by Chanel, select Chanel boutiques nationwide.  
**PAGE 124:** Top by Dolce & Gabbana, select Dolce & Gabbana boutiques nationwide. Earrings by Chanel Fine Jewelry, \$10,400, select Chanel boutiques nationwide.  
**PAGE 125:** Dress by Salvatore Ferragamo, ferragamo.com. Top by Sportmax, us.sportmax.com.  
**PAGE 126:** Dress by Givenchy, givenchy.com. Earrings by Samuel François, modaoperandi.com.  
**PAGES 128–129:** Top, pants, necklace, ring, belt by Chanel, select Chanel boutiques nationwide.  
**PAGE 130:** Dress by Azima Muzah, azimamuzah.com.  
**PAGES 130–131:** Coat, dress, top by Miu Miu, miu-miu.com. Earrings by Charlotte Chesnais, charlotteschnais.fr.

Prices are approximate. ELLE recommends that merchandise availability be checked with local stores.

## MEGAN'S ACCOUNT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 88

arrests were frequent. Lundstrom's 5'8" frame, blonde hair, pink extensions, and angel-wing back tattoo left an impression on carpet-patrolling cops.

At the time, Instagram was taking off, and Lundstrom built a private account to connect with fellow prostitutes—a chance at a social outlet, a community. But it soon became Otto's recruiting tool. Monitoring the account daily, he barred her from communicating with anyone outside the life and forced her to post messages like, "My daddy's amazing, you should come choose him up." Her handle, as with most of Otto's "girls," included a modified spelling of the word *bunny*.

Otto's use of the account foreshadowed what's now perhaps the most common sex trafficking recruitment vehicle: social media. Experts say victims are groomed by pimps who play the numbers game. "[Predators] could say 'you're beautiful' to 100 girls just to get one bite," says Annie McAdams, a Houston attorney whose lawsuits against Facebook on behalf of three underage victims have reached Texas appeals courts. McAdams has spoken to thousands of victims. "These kids are college-educated with normal family lives, but they become dependent on compliments," she says, which sometimes escalates into gifts. Gauert, the Seattle prosecutor, has seen a "dramatic increase" in open-air prostitution this past year as well. "Women and girls are literally deciding between prostitution and rent."

In Vegas, Lundstrom learned of daily flights to Williston, North Dakota, a small town enjoying an oil and gas boom. Makeshift camps housed tens of thousands of temporary workers—nearly all men—making the town a vice den. Otto routinely dispatched Lundstrom to Williston, where she'd work until she met her quota of \$1,000 per day. Afterward, inside her dingy roadside motel, she'd tug her sweatshirt hood around her face and escape into short-term slumber.

Over dinner at a Ruth's Chris Steak House, Otto praised Lundstrom and hinted that she might soon earn a car. Through Instagram, she'd observed prostitutes posting glamour shots with new luxury cars and designer shoes—the trappings of a happy life, it seemed. A week later, Otto's bottom picked her up in a used \$550 Mercedes-Benz—a gift in recognition of four years of loyalty. "Four years?" Lundstrom thought. For the first time since Luther, something pierced her brainwashed stupor. Lundstrom wondered if she was to become: "Maybe

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I'm just doing 'being pimped' wrong?" she thought. She started questioning everything and stopped meeting her quota. Otto cut off her money. That week, Lundstrom did normal things for the first time in ages—cooking for her kids, going to bed at a decent hour. Thinking about how her eldest child had attended five schools in three years, she gave her father a call. She was in crisis mode and needed to move home fast. When Lundstrom called Otto to explain, he flipped the script, announcing she was fired: "Don't ever show your face on the strip again."

Marooned in her parents' Greeley home with a criminal record, zero credit, and two kids, Lundstrom began brokering buyers again. Inside a jail cell, where she landed after knocking on the Vail hotel room door of an undercover cop, she thought, "I can't do this anymore."

Lundstrom eventually found a secretarial job at a doctor's office, but when men called to make an appointment, she grew paralyzed, whipsawed by panic attacks and the occasional blackout. She was diagnosed with PTSD. At 29, she mustered the courage to give college a shot, earning a full scholarship to the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley based on her high school record. She chose finance as a major. After all, she was accustomed to handling money.

Not long after moving back home, she learned Greeley was on the cusp of its own oil and fracking boom. Knowing what this portended for the community, she disclosed her own experiences while speaking about sex trafficking during an evangelical pastors' association lunch. "You weren't chained up. Why didn't you just leave?" one woman asked. Lundstrom tried to explain the concept of brainwashing, but failed to make headway.

For the next few weeks, she was glued to her computer, searching for terms like "cult" that might validate her experience. She filed paperwork to form a nonprofit to help other victims of sex trafficking, and set out on a makeshift lecture circuit, speaking at any venue that would have her—churches, rotary clubs, hospitals. During one talk at a police station, she connected her laptop to a monitor and posted Backpage ads specific to six regions of Colorado, each listing the number for a separate burner phone. Over the course of her presentation (and the next couple of days), the phones rang, on average, once every five minutes.

Meanwhile, she continued using the Instagram account she'd started as a prostitute. But instead of posting about pimp life, she began posting about therapy, financial aid, housing opportunities. To her surprise, her following grew. Women

sent private messages expressing a desire to escape. She kept mentions of her burgeoning nonprofit minimal to maintain the intimate nature of the account. Occasionally, one of her followers would post about her own exit. "I thought if she could do it, I could do it," says Lisa Junior, a formerly trafficked woman who connected to Lundstrom through a hashtag memorializing a friend. "She empowered me and showed me unconditional love through social media." Junior now owns an aesthetician company.

In her third year at UNC, Lundstrom organized a campus human trafficking awareness week. Seeking a scholar to participate in a panel, she was referred to a young sociology professor named Angie Henderson, who specialized in gender labels and perceptions of women's roles. In an email, Henderson said she was happy to help, though she knew nothing about sex trafficking.

The panel kicked off with the Greeley police chief and district attorney (both male) discussing the local trafficking problem. Listening to them talk, something began boiling within Henderson. "Why aren't we talking about men and the demand for commercial sex?" she asked the audience. "How about we talk about teaching men and boys to stop sexually assaulting women?" The room grew silent. Lundstrom was up next. Henderson listened in awe as Lundstrom compared her North Dakota experience with the local fracking boom, offering a cogent macroeconomic analysis based on supply and demand. To Henderson, it was as if Lundstrom were the scholar.

Afterward, Lundstrom dropped a thank-you gift at Henderson's office—a candle she'd decorated with feathers. Touched, the professor got to thinking: Despite Lundstrom's intelligence and eloquence in speaking about her experiences, it was clear she lacked closure. As a sociologist, Henderson believed the answers to any lingering questions could come from data. She emailed Lundstrom with an offer to help, and also a request: Might she be willing to help her create a spring seminar on sex trafficking? They decided to meet for coffee.

Lundstrom arrived with questions—five pages' worth: How are others recruited? How are they groomed? Was my experience normal? To Henderson, the questions were textbook sociological queries. Peering up from the paperwork, Henderson wondered why on earth Lundstrom was a finance major. She suggested they team up on a study but questioned how they could collect data from women actively being trafficked—a population that is so hidden, so inaccessible.

"Not a problem," Lundstrom replied. "I have access."

The next day, Lundstrom asked her followers whether they'd be willing to be interviewed for research purposes. Several said yes, and Henderson applied for a grant. For a proper academic study, they would need at least eight participants. Lundstrom posted a note announcing the study and offering \$45 gift cards to participants. About 30 minutes later, Henderson received a text: "I heard about the study." Another text: "I'm willing to participate." Suddenly, her phone was blowing up. By the end, she'd calendared more than 70 interviews.

For six weeks, Henderson asked personal questions about horrific crimes. Some women had been raped at gunpoint. Others were raped while their kids were in the car. Tears flowed on both ends of the line. Following the interviews, Henderson shuddered at the findings. Eighteen percent of the women reported having buyers who worked in law enforcement; 10 percent of victims were trafficked by family members; suicide attempts and overdoses were common exit methods. Henderson lobbied her department to introduce courses on the sociology of sex trafficking and global perspectives on prostitution. Lundstrom guest-lectured, presenting PowerPoint slides on how to spot pimp tattoos and recognize lingo like "You down for the crown?" After one class, Henderson pulled Lundstrom aside: "Have you ever thought about a graduate degree in sociology?" Lundstrom laughed off the notion. It had taken her long enough to obtain a bachelor's. "Keep it in the back of your mind," she said. "You think like a sociologist."

**HENDERSON'S RESEARCH** will be published online and in a 2022 edition of the *Journal of Human Trafficking*—the first peer-reviewed article based on direct conversations with active and former prostitutes who hadn't come into contact with law enforcement or victim services. Meanwhile, Lundstrom's nonprofit, the Avery Center ("Avery" was her name under pimp control in Vegas), is thriving, having received \$1.6 million in multiyear federal and state grants. Henderson serves as the lead data analyst and training coordinator. Since meeting Lundstrom, she's overhauled her academic focus from gender labels to sex trafficking. The feather candle Lundstrom gave her still sits in her office. Last year, Lundstrom received her master's in sociology, with Henderson as her adviser. After four years in the sex industry, it turns out that her true calling was about the un-sexist thing possible: data. "Research," she says, "saved my life." ■